

CNFC: 25 Years' Fishing and Shrimping in Africa

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China's Fishing Fleet Partnering for Win-Win Results with African Countries

CNFC's 25 Years of Fishing and Shrimping in Africa

In March 1985, an oceangoing fleet established by China National Fisheries Corporation(CNFC) made its maiden voyage to the Atlantic Ocean. From then on, CNFC embarked on a new journey to explore the wide ocean. Abiding by the principle of mutual trust and benefit, the company has conducted positive cooperation with African countries for years and established 8 branch offices in Africa. It has contributed a lot to increasing the employment and serving for national development strategy.

By Zhu Xiaolei, reporter of Africa Magazine

On the 10th day of March 1985, a fleet of 13 distant-water fishing boats of China Fisheries Joint Company (former China National Fishery Corporation) setsail from Mawei port, Fujian province, headed to the ocean, thus marking the beginning of China National Fishery Corporation's (CNFC) "fishing and shrimping" operations in the open sea.

Shen Miao Cheng, CNFC's deputy party secretary, elaborated the past achievements of his company to this Africa Magazine reporter: "CNFC is the first distant-water fishery company that ever implemented the "Going Global" strategy in China's agriculture industry. Growing from a small entity, it has made indelible contribution to the nation's development strategy over the past 25 years. CNFC's output in the waters neighboring African countries constitutes 2/3 of its entire catch. It has opened representative offices and established aquatic products processing facilities in 8 African countries.



*CNFC's fishing fleet****Deploy on-land processing facilities and create economic benefits for local communities***

He said the operating scope of CNFC covers high sea activities and cooperation with coastal countries in their respective 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zones.

Reporter: Your businesses spread over vast seas along West, East and Northern Africa. Do the African countries support CNFC?

Shen Miao Cheng: Many African countries appreciate the contribution made by CNFC to their local economies. Some African countries explicitly state that foreign companies planning to involve in products of resource development must establish joint ventures with local businesses. CNFC not only enters partnership with local companies but also employs half of its crew members from the local communities. So far it has employed over 10,000 man/times accumulatively and the number is increasing still, plus building on-land processing factories and transferring fishing skills. In contrast, the western companies would just conduct fishing on the sea but never set up fixed facilities on land, making limited efforts to create jobs for the locals. Many African countries take fishery as their primary industry and appreciate that CNFC's generating income of foreign exchange for them. Our cooperation with African countries aims to deliver mutual benefits and win-win results.

Reporter: What kind of aquatic products your company is catching in Africa?

Shen Miao Cheng: The African coasts boast bounty aquatic products while CNFC conducts fishing and processing strictly by the market rules. Usually we would catch squid, cuttlefish, octopus and other mollusks, yellow croaker, ribbon fish and other hard-body fish, as well as some shrimps. Fish is frozen on board directly, or delivered to the processing plant on land via transport boats for small package processing. CNFC ships and processes 160,000 tons of frozen products annually.

Reporter: Which markets are the products sold to?

Shen Miao Cheng: Product sales also follow market-based rules. Our company has obtained EU sanitation license for its processing facilities in Africa. Its products are sold to European and Japanese markets. Also, some products are transported home to complement the Chinese people's "dinner table". These products are natural, green, free of pollution and safe to eat. The African people love to have fishes from mid or higher water levels which are less expensive with a large output. For yellow croakers, sardines and other high quality fish, we freeze them directly before selling. Fish fillet that can't be served fresh is sold to other market suppliers to be canned.

Reporter: What is the biggest change CNFC has experienced over the past 20 years?

Shen Miao Cheng: China is a late comer in deep-sea fishing. In the beginning our catching

method was backward and resources limited. At that time, our technicians went on board of European ships to learn their skills earnestly in order to understand the structure and operating mode of the modern boats. Gradually we have introduced and absorbed new skills and rebuilt or redesigned our fishing boats. Built from scratch, now we pursue innovation relentlessly and our equipment has transformed from coastal trawlers to large-scale purse-seine vessels, tuna fishing vessels and, trawlers of all kinds currently. Today in terms of fishing facilities, we are almost on a par with the developed countries. The change is indeed tremendous.



Weighting the catch

Crew members devoting to

ocean fishing without complaint

Over the years, CNFC has accumulated a lot of experiences in localization. "We treat every staff equally, provide them with on-going training, and respect their unique local customs. For example, crew of Islam belief need to pray 5 times a day, kneeling down towards the direction of Mecca each time. Noticing this, the company management bought a large number of cushions to make their routine more comfortable and dignified when kneeling down. Also, countries like Morocco and Mauritania are very concerned about environment protection issues, so if we catch sea turtles or other protected species we release them immediately. When we find human bodies, we would come to a berth and hold burial ceremonies for them." Shen Miao Cheng stressed that it is imperative to abide by the local laws and customs in Africa, otherwise it would be impossible to live in harmony with the local staffs.

While operating in Africa, his company would inevitably get involved in cases of blackmail occasionally. CNFC has managed to resolve this kind of problems by leveraging its understanding of the local rules and legislations. Shen Miao Cheng described one incidence to the reporter that he experienced by himself in Senegal. "When I newly arrived in Senegal I found that some locals would come to our boats and demand fishes from the captains when the boats came to shore. Mishandling such an issue would certainly lead to trouble. In response I took two measures: first, I made a rule that the captains were not allowed nor had any right to handle their catches. The next day I went to call upon the local customs office, port administration, public security authorities, and fishery administration bureau to make explanations and asked for their understanding and support. My explanations made the locals realize that CNFC was a company that respected their rules and played by the book."

Shen Miao Cheng has worked in Africa for 16 years. "There are a lot of people like me in CNFC and I am just one of them. Some of my colleagues have even served in Africa for 25 years, as long as CNFC's "Going Global" strategy. They cannot give much time and attention to their families since they have to work overseas but they bear loneliness without complaint and never give up despite the hardship."

Shen Miao Cheng works most of his time in the representative office as a commander, but he also has frequent experiences of life on the sea. When talking about his crewmen, he got a bit emotional. "They do live a hard life. Often a boat would only make a port call once a year, and sometimes 2 or 3 years apart. Maritime work is not only tough but also perilous. The weather near West Africa is pretty hot, and marine operations can be really tedious. The crewmen are faced with risks from diseases, wars, and pirates. They have no weekends and have to work in shifts day and night. They cast the net every two hours and at peak time (e.g. octopus production season), it could be net casting and pulling every hour. They also need to complete chores like cleaning, sorting, instant freezing, packaging, and storing. The incessant cyclic operation makes the job very hard. Nonetheless, they face the sea and daily life of monotony with no complaint."

The company has made tremendous efforts to offer better conditions for the crewmen because of their hard work. Now they can send emails or surf the internet via the personal computers installed onboard, and contact family members via satellite phones. When crewmembers make a port call or when it is a festival occasion, the first thing the company does is to provide them with prepaid calling cards. "Compared with the early days, the change is truly huge. In the past the crewmen could only contact their families by writing letters which would often take months to arrive."



No weekends, one catch every two hours

For an industry of high risks and high returns, more talents are imperatively needed

Deep-sea fishing involves high risks and high investments. Shen Miao Cheng pointed that out more than once. "The investment for a boat goes up to tens of millions or even hundreds of millions of US dollars. As the boat is driven by diesel, with the rising oil price, the investment in fuel, once was about 10% of the total costs, now jumps almost 50%. Heavily influenced by the climate, our industry's revenue depends on the weather changes, ocean currents and water temperatures. In the context of the rising costs, our traditional experiences don't work any more, as we need to control the costs and develop new markets. "

He discussed the difficulties that CNFC is faced with in a frank and open manner. "Though we have managed to close some gaps in our fishing fleet by purchasing second-hand vessels and hiring foreign designers, overall, our investment in the fleet is still inadequate, and our concepts of technology still lag behind the developed world." He pointed out that fishing boats have higher requirements than merchant vessels, as the latter demands more capacity, the former requires better detecting, fishing and processing equipment and facilities.

"Deep-sea fishing is also going through the modernizing trend and more and more talents are needed, as we do feel the pain of talent shortage now. Marine life is tough, and today's youth have mostly grown up as the only child in their families. The number of students signing up for

aquatic industry is dwindling. To address this, we are working with some colleges, to give direct sponsorship or support to students willing to join us, or to related scientific researches. In addition, the Ministries of Industry and Information Technology and Science and Technology have put fishing fleet construction modernization on their agenda, as the government is providing increasing technology and funding support to businesses.”

In face of all the difficulties Shen Miao Cheng still appears optimistic, nevertheless. He said as deep sea fishing is listed as a strategic industry of the nation, CNFC's projects will be continued despite the rising operating costs.

Related links:

the CNFC Story

To mark the 25th anniversary of CNFC's launching of the “Going Global” strategy, the company published “The Seafarers Stories”, a collection of memoirs of its staffs, in 2010. Some excerpts are posted below to share with our readers.

1

. An anecdote at Somaliland International Hotel

I worked near Somali's northwestern sea once. When we arrived in Somaliland, we stayed in the Hargeisa International Hotel, said to be the best in town. However, it has only 6 rooms as a matter of fact. When it got dark, the entire hotel relied on one small generator for power supply, and the lights in the rooms gleamed like fireflies. As the hotel had no dinner to serve, we had to eat the canned food we brought in from Aden. To make instant noodles, we went to ask for some hot water but only got some tea. When we opened the pork can from Aden, we were dismayed to find black molds on it, so it had to be thrown away. The following day when we were about to have lunch, we opened another can and only to realize that the dark spots we saw the previous night were actually chopped green onions and condiments. It was really a big pity that we threw away the other can of pork. (Dong Enhe)

2

. “Government Minister Treatment” in Nigeria

Due to some false accusation, one Nigerian staff and I were detained by a Nigerian court and put into prison. In there, I enjoyed the treatment for a “government minister.”

The people in the prison were classified into different standings, strictly following the government hierarchy. The head of the prison room was called “President”; the guy who controlled the bribery money paid in by the new inmates, who would get a good beating if failed to

do so, was called "Minister of Finance". Entering the prison, I found the middle of the room is open-air and only the space along side the walls could offer shelter from the sun and rain. Over 100 prisoners were held in the some 300-square-meter prison room. After promising to pay 3500 Naira per day, we were each given official titles. Since I was a foreigner, I was named "Foreign Minister" and was entitled to enjoy privileges such as moving around freely in the prison, sleeping next to the "President" under the roof by the wall, and given a piece of cloth as mattress. And when I passed by others, they would bow respectfully and make room for me to pass through.....(Wang Xuyang)

3

. The most disciplined staff

When I first arrived in West Africa, I found it hard to relate with the locals and got frequently involved in quarrels with them due to differences in our languages, cultures, ways of thinking and habits. However, as time went by I began to take a liking of them, feeling part of them for sharing every happy or sad moment with them in work and daily life now.

In the beginning of my arrival at our representative office in Sierra Leone, it was the rainy season. One day as evening began to fall, a rain storm stroke Freetown. Umbrellas or raincoats were just useless. The local staff in the office had already taken their showers and changed into after-work clothes. Then, someone exclaimed in the courtyard, "Our boats are being washed away!"

Even before I could realize what was happening, the local staff already dashed out. When I made my way to the beach, they'd already run into the seawater. Seeing how fiercely the waves were crushing upon the rocks, I knew it would be hard to pull the boats back. However as darkness finally came in full, they came back ashore with the boats. Pushing the vessels with one hand, they were paddling with the other while someone was inside the boat bailing out the water. Due to the night chill, they were shaking all over but everyone was smiling from ear to ear as if they had just won the victory of a big battle. (Ren Jiaming)

4

. Moon Festival, a father moved to tears by his son's drawing

To avoid affecting their loved ones working far away from home the families would often only report good news to them. Therefore, most seamen read family letters with happiness. However, on the Moon Festival Day of 1996, my roommate read his letter in tears. The letter came from his wife. At the end of the letter it reads, "Our son always asks when you will come back. He wants to see you in person because others say he looks like his father, but he has no idea what you look like. As the Moon Festival is coming, he drew a moon on the paper as a gift for you from both of us. I am wondering how long it would be before we could sit together to celebrate a festival day together." As my roommate had worked in West Africa for 4 and half years, his son was 4 and half years old then. (Ren Guiming)

5

. Manager Liang Binfa

Mr. Liang, my manager, has won hearty respect from all his working partners. As his interpreter, I am deeply impressed. In 1994 when West African franc was heavily devaluated, the Dakar boat plant demanded to renegotiate the annual ship maintenance contract with CNFC. The primary negotiators of the plant showed great respect to Mr. Liang, perhaps because they had done business many times with him before. After several rounds of back and forth, the other side began sweating heavily, however, finding it hard to continue, as the two sides came to the core issue of the price. The negotiation came to a standstill. All of sudden, Mr. Liang offered to go up by 30% at this moment and the two sides quickly started shaking hands, all satisfied with the outcome. He explained to me afterwards, in a business negotiation one should think about the interests of his own side and also the actual situation of the other side. (Deng Rongcheng)

6. The Saharan Adventure

In 1994 the company's interpreter Wang Song and his wife ventured through Sahara by car. Unfortunately they got lost in the desert. Having little gas left, the driver, legs shaking, dared not to explore for the way by driving around. They got stuck in the middle of nowhere in the sea of sand and finding help was seemed highly unlikely. The company's representative office in Mauritania had to report to the local air force for a helicopter search. The search went on for three days for no result, however. In the end Wang, his wife and the driver got help from two camel riding local natives for the direction back to the right track only on the fourth day when the trio was on the verge of passing out for hunger. What was even more touching to Wang Song was the two kindhearted shepherds never asked for any reward for saving their lives by giving them the right direction. (Deng Rongcheng)

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